Language Arts: Defending Free Speech

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There are many possible threats to our right of free speech, but none is more insidious that a threat to our ability to speak. If we cannot speak, we have censored ourselves in a way that neither we nor anyone else can easily address, much less correct. What I have in mind here is the erosion of our language and of our ability to use language to express our ideas and to participate in the marketplace of thought. The natural first thought that comes to mind when this topic is raised is the corruption of language in the face of Tweeting and Texting and all manner of stunted language, replacing and diminishing the full potential of language to communicate. I join many persons in decrying that kind of flattening of the language, similar in effect to a lobotomy performed on the language center of our brain, but in this essay I do not want to content myself or yourself simply with hand-wringing. Everyone can complain about our loss of linguistic skill, but I want to focus attention on what we can do about it.

Creative Writing in Pencil, on Paper.

There is an astonishing trend in modern elementary education to dispense with handwriting and to go directly to the word processor and the Tweeter. It is obvious that educators who promote that as a time saving device – leaving more free time in the school day of other noble learning activities – have never thought through what it means to create in words. In consequence they leave their students handicapped and unable to participate in many of the deepest and most important aspects of intelligent creation.

This is a bold – not to say supercharged – indictment of modern educational practice. How can I justify such a sweeping condemnation of accepted practice? It does not apply equally to all kinds of writing. At the moment, I am pounding away on the keyboard of my computer, rolling out text in a word processing program on the computer. The absence of a pencil from my hand and of bond paper on the desktop in no way limit my talent for invective. So what's the problem?

As I write at this moment I am composing an essay crafted purely in words, built into sentences of a very conventional sort. If we were speaking face-to-face I would be saying aloud precisely what I am saying in print right now. You, the hearer, might or might not accept what I am saying but in any case you would have no trouble understanding it. This is straight English, for which computers and word processing serve admirably. I can freely concede all of that because what I am writing, while perhaps new to the reader, is not a creative expression. It is a conventional expression of some unconventional – not to say outlandish – propositions. And perhaps not so unconventional as I suppose they are. I think many persons have been disquieted by the devolution of language in America today, and have stopped to read this note to buttress their convictions. The bottom line, in any case, is that this essay – this actual exercise in human expression – is not itself very creative.

What then is a creative expression? What kind of expression defies the word processor and the best-laid software of computing giants? Let me give an example, because there is no way that anyone could catalog in advance what comprises "creation." It is creative precisely to the degree that none of us define or delimit it in advance. We know it when we see it; or in other words we know it when someone shows it to us. But examples abound. Because it is one that I am familiar with, I'll take mathematics.

To create in mathematics is to attempt to think through an issue that may in fact be unthinkable. What I mean is that it involves wrestling with a question like "Why is X true?" when in fact it may very well be the case the X is not true. The ponderer may as a result of his struggle come to the realization that X is not true, or he may come to the conclusion – this is the commonest case – that he doesn't have sufficient tools to settle it one way or the other, or he may erroneously convince himself that he has explained why X is true when is reality X is not true. The mathematician doesn't know whether X is true or not, and he doesn't know how he is going to find the answer. Since the truth is obscure, the actual tools he would need to discover it are also obscure. His only assets at the start are interest, determination, and presumably a lot of free time. Now to put it quite simply, what are the odds that someone working for Microsoft will by accident have programmed precisely the right ideas into Word and left them waiting there for the mathematician to use? Before you approach this question, by the way, you need also to ask yourself an even more basic one: what are the odds that the mathematician would correctly anticipate how lucky he was about to be, and would recognize the right tools in the tool box even before he had even thought through the question?

There is no alternative to stumbling around aimlessly, and very likely unproductively. The mathematician doesn't know which software tools he would want to have because he doesn't know if X is actually true or not. That's what he is trying to find out. We can accord him very high marks for creativity. So high in fact that we can't help him. What he needs is the absolute maximum of unstructured space in which to experiment with approaches, including not only words and numbers but also diagrams

and graphics of all kinds, most of them indistinguishable from doodles and abstractions, when he can't even see through to the grammatical structure of his own thoughts. He is not having fun. It is a gut-wrenching exercise because it may all turn out to have been a futile waste of time and effort.

The mathematician cannot even begin his path of exploration unless he can put pencil to paper to make notes and messages to himself, nailing down in grey and white what he has seen along the way and preserving it in a place to which he can return whenever he needs to. Some day if his exploration is a success he will have to hammer out a proper, word-processed statement of the logic he has created and the conclusions he has reached. That day is far off, and represents just another hurdle he will have to clear if he is to win the applause of the world for this achievement. Once he knows what it is that he has to say to the public, he will be able to figure out how to say it, but in the heat of the moment there is no time to deal with that issue.

There are many kinds of creation that could be described along these lines. I chose mathematics only because, as I noted, it is the one that I am most familiar with. Now what if that budding mathematician was unable to write with a pencil? He could not begin to think unless he had a memory so prodigious that he could remember all the details of his thinking carried out over a period of months. In short, he could not be a mathematician. That career would have been foreclosed to him. A grade school that refuses to teach its pupils how to write with pencil and paper has made it impossible for them ever to pursue mathematics. The nation that refuses to teach that has guaranteed that it will never have any mathematicians except any foreign-born ones that it can entice to come and settle at its universities. No writing means no native mathematicians, ever. Obviously this would generalize immediately to related fields like mathematical physics and mathematical logic, the field that includes the core theory of computers themselves. No computer theorists. No theorists of any kind. No one whose job it is to tackle undefined, undelimited mysteries.

Educated ignorance

The rejection of simple writing as a subject worthy of time and effort bespeaks an educational establishment that simply doesn't understand creation because they have never experienced it. The uneducated are designing education for the uneducated. That's all they know. This conflict has arisen before in the context of memory and memory training. Even when I was a schoolboy, memory was derided as a sentimental holdover from primitive times. We were taught that it's not necessary to remember as long as there are libraries, or in the present context it would be the Internet. Memory was a holdover from a simpler past of horn books and chalk and slate. Whew! At last we had emerged into modern times when, like John Dewey, we could devote ourselves to creative problem-solving pure and simple. Well, these must be the post-modern times, because memory is back. A century of research on the factor called I.Q., research devoted not

only to testing for it but also addressing the multidimensional question of what, if anything, it is and what it is related to.

One kind of relationship is its relation to its consequences. I.Q. is understood to be a measure of what is called, for lack of a more revealing name, "general intelligence." It is associated with many measures of success in life, including of course income and health. In relation to the how it manifests itself in behavior, it is associated with problem-solving. It correlates are traits with names like "cleverness," "adaptability," "problem solving," "ingenuity," and the like. It is not so correlated with intellect in the narrow sense of expertise, though ingenuity is a very useful trait for a scientist too, and intellect and general intelligence are by no means unrelated. In another dimension, general intelligence is highly correlated with, drum roll please, memory. The association is so tight that good memory and high I.Q. are close to being synonyms. The most characteristic skill of ingenious people is that they have at their command a broad and deep library of stored information ready to be applied to the problem at hand. So generations ago our educators were convinced that in the interests of promoting ingenuity, they could save scarce instructional time by discarding practice in the single teachable skill most associated with it and essential to it. John Dewey seems to have convinced himself that cleverness and ingenuity arise in a vacuum, and subsequent generations of educators seem to have convinced themselves that he was right. Too bad.

An Observation about the Structure of the Language

The focus of these remarks is the written word. We learn to speak and to communicate via the spoken word by direct interaction with or without formal schooling. Formal schooling will give us a richer vocabulary of words and, more importantly, a richer vocabulary of experiences that we inherit from others by way of the written word, but even in the absence of schooling we can speak pretty well. The reason, basically, is that the only native human language is the spoken language. That *is* our language. Written language is necessarily some kind of code language or symbol language which derives its meaning and its usefulness from how well it relates to the language we speak.

The more transparent and intimate the communication between how we write and how we speak, the more effective our writing will be. We have all experienced trying to read highly technical material, rife with strange symbols that have no spoken counterpart, and referencing objects that are beyond our experience and therefore divorced from our spoken vocabulary. We human beings are pretty clever and with some training we can decipher the most obscure kinds of technical text. We can adapt to any kind of symbol language that another human being can invent. The shear difficulty and tedium associated with that effort however clearly marks it as something out on the fringes of communication. When we want to communicate, we use the language we speak. This dictum is even truer than most people realize. There are many cultures in which people learn to read aloud, a practice that is definitely frowned on in American schools. But

inevitably, when we read we speak the words in our mind and it is that spoken narrative that communicates the meaning of what we are reading. We read aloud to ourselves even when we don't let our lips move. As a result, the better the words and phrases sound, the more effectively they will communicate. That is true of the internal pathway of communication from the page of text you are reading to the absorption of its meaning and significance in your mind. It is equally true therefore of interpersonal communication by way of the written word. When you write, the better your text sounds, the more effectively it will communicate to your audience.

Among other things, that is why when writing we use punctuation marks in addition to the words themselves. Punctuation tells the reader how the lines are supposed to sound. They impose phrasing and emphasis on the text, not changing the content in the narrow sense, but informing the "narration" through which the sequence of words becomes a flow of ideas.[1] In ancient languages there were no grammatical marks. The words simply followed one another – or sometimes were placed not strictly in sequence but in groups – and it was the job of the reader to deduce the flow directly from the meanings of the words. This can be done, as I know from experience. For two summers in college I was a translator of written, scientific Russian, working at the National Bureau of Standards. No one had less of an idea of spoken Russian than I did. I lived in dread of the moment someone would greet me in Russian, because I probably would not remember how to respond. But by looking all the words in the dictionary and laying them out on the desk, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, I could work out what each sentence meant. Thankfully, I was not paid for speed. The Russian language has the great advantage, from my point of view, that each word comes with instructions telling the reader what part it plays in the sentence. Without that guide, I would probably still be at my desk poring over those old articles in atomic physics.

Syllables

The unit of writing seems to be the letter. This is true even to the point where we think "sounding out" a word consists of sounding the letters one by one. Isn't that the point of phonics? From a strictly production point of view that is true. The keyboard offers a choice of letters and we compose by choosing them one by one, but it is not true of the language we are crafting. The unit of human language is the syllable. There is no way to conceive of the "sound" of a word except in terms of the sound of the syllables. Individual letters do not really have linguistic sounds. The letter T has a distinctive sound, it is true, but that sound is not a distinct part – an "atom" so to speak – of any word. Notice in fact that we draw a clear distinction between the sound of the letter T, which one might indicate by "t" or "t__", and the name of the letter T, which is the word

[1] A perhaps idiosyncratic conviction of mine is that we use too much punctuation, in an attempt to manage, as it were, the work of the reader. The better our words and syntax sound, the more we can leave the reader free to find his or her own meter and phrasing. I have in mind especially the urge to put seemingly every other word in quotation marks.

"te." While it is certainly possible to say "t", it is quite unnatural. The names of the consonants are not the sounds, they are complete words constructed to highlight the consonant sounds. The syllable TEL(–ephone) has a sound value in human language. The T is part of that, but it cannot be thought of in isolation from the rest of –elephone. Phonics, accordingly, has to be understood as the understanding of syllables and how they sound.

Vowels

Unlike consonants, vowels are not letters – not written characters – they are sounds. In order to have a written language it is necessary to have some way of identifying the sound we want in writing and for that purpose we have characters that more-or-less designate vowels, but the correlation is rather loose. The language of vowels however is absolutely clear. For practical purposes, vowels are syllables; syllables are vowels. Each syllable contains a single vowel (sound), and each vowel supports a syllable.

To the best of my knowledge, the English language recognizes fifteen vowels: long and short A, long and short E, long and short I, long and short O, long and short U, long and short OO, OU (also written AU), Y, and mute E (which is also written Ə). Mute E is unique in that in modern English it has no sound of its own, but it modifies how the rest of the word is pronounced. The OO and OU vowels are examples of something that is common in other European languages but rare in English, a diphthong. A diphthong is a pair of vowels – vowel characters – which are truly merged into a single, different vowel. In other words, a diphthong is a clever way to write a vowel without have to invent a new letter for it, by simply using some of the existing twenty-six letters. Y is also unusual in that it can be either a consonant or a vowel, morphologically, but it is pronounced the same either way. It is a vowel sound that can function as a consonant. In languages where the letter R is rolled – like Irish and all Slavic languages – the rolled R is also a vowel, but not in English.

There are several differences between English and the languages of continental Europe. One difference that I have already noted is that we do not roll our R's and most continental people do, so there is no corresponding vowel R in English. A more significant difference is that our mute E is truly mute. In continental languages it is pronounced, though the exact sound value varies from language to language. French is the closest to English practice, and mute E is very nearly mute in French too. In the south of France however, mute E is intoned, with a sound like the English word "err," and in all song lyrics in French the mute E is intoned the same way. In German, the sound value also differs between different dialects. In Austrian for instance, it is a quite clear "ee" sound, so "strasse" (street) is pronounced "stras-see" in Vienna. In Spanish and Italian there is no mute E, but nouns and adjective typically end in a vowel sound anyway.

There is one further complication in English which is the result of influences of continental pronunciation rules creeping across the Channel. On the continent, there is no long A. The letter A is invariant, and is what we call short A. Long E however is pronounced like our long A. Similarly, long I is pronounced like our long E. Lastly, there is no long English U – no letter that has the "you" sound – on the continent. Long U over there is pronounced like our long OO. The reason why this becomes a complication is that in many English words we use the continental pronunciation of the vowels, probably because those words are imports from the French language. Thus for instance, while the I in "mine" is long English I, the line I in "machine" is long continental I, which is our long E. OU – the "ou" in "ouch" and "house" – has its own peculiarities because it is sometimes written AU and sometimes OW. Lastly, the distinction between long OO and short OO may not be entirely familiar in theory, though it is very familiar in practice. The long vowel is the OO on "food" and "too." The short sound in the OO in "book" and "good."

So this is the lineup. Fifteen vowels written in terms of six characters, A, E, I, O, U, and Y, with some ambiguity about how E, I, and U are to be pronounced.

Correct English Pronunciation

Now, with the understanding that there is precisely one vowel sound per syllable and that the pronunciation of syllables is the foundation of English spelling and pronunciation, we can begin to put vowels and syllables together. This note addresses and solves some perplexing questions in English pronunciation. It is not about accents, national, regional, or class. They are all equally correct or incorrect, depending on one's point of view, I guess. It is about the sound value of letters in English words, and specifically it is about how to pronounce vowels.

It is impossible to understand and use a language without understanding the pronunciation rules, because at their roots all languages are spoken languages. The written languages related to them are in themselves not properly "language," if we understand that term to mean the medium in which we form interpersonal communication. This note, for instance, is a communication of sorts, but it is not interpersonal in the strictest sense. I have no idea who is reading it, and as I write I do not get any of the immediate feedback of understanding or confusions that we get when we converse directly with others. That is not to diminish the value of the written word. It is in many ways far more effective and powerful that conversation. The reader could be reclining comfortably thousands of miles away; he could be doing so centuries after I type these words; and he could bring to this experience a great wealth of related knowledge and experience that I couldn't even guess at.

We all know that the messages conveyed in writing are far more complex and generally more memorable than the spoken words of daily conversation. The medium however is the same, and it is the medium of the spoken word.[2]

Pronunciation of syllables

Now we can handle the fundamental rule of syllables and their pronunciation. Every syllable consists of a vowel and some number – possibly zero – of consonants.

If the vowel is the last letter of the syllable, it is long and if it is followed in the syllable by a consonant it is short. If the syllable consists of just the vowel, it is usually long.

Since Y and Ə have only one sound value – no separate long and short sounds – this rule doesn't apply to them in practice.

Example: "Final E"

Consider the word "fine." Why do we pronounce it fīn instead of fĭn? We have a word fĭn, which signifies among other things the appendage of a fish. How then do we know that I feel fīn and not fĭn. The part of the fish is a one syllable word of which the final letter is a consonant, n. So the I is short I, ĭ. The way I feel is a two syllable word – two vowels and therefore two syllables: fi—ne. Since the first syllable ends in the vowel i, it is long I. The second syllable ends in the letter Ə. To make a point, we could leave just a little breath left over for the second syllable, pronouncing it "fī—nuh." In practice, in modern English the mute E is really mute: no breath left over. We actually pronounce the word "fine" as though it was written "fī—ĕn." Those persons who speak Continental languages – French, German, Spanish, and the others – accuse English-speaking people of using "compound vowels," unlike their "pure vowels." That is to say, they hear the "i-e" sequence when we say "fī—ĕn," but they mistakenly conclude that we are simply mispronouncing the "i."

The example actually covers all cases of "final E." The tortured nonsense that goes for an explanation of "silent E" in the schools is completely mistaken. It is treated as a sort of phonetic magic, acting at a distance to confer on some other vowel a long sound.

Example: Sara, meet Sarah

Why do we place an "h" at the end of names that end on the letter "a?" In the Continental languages, there is no "long A" or "short A;" the letter A is always

[2] We can amplify our writing with all kinds of visual aids – charts, drawings, photographs, and the like – but they cannot substitute for the words. A picture may indeed be worth a thousand words, but it never substitutes for those words. One common mistake young writers makes is to pepper their writing with these visuals, leaving the reader to interpret them unassisted, and hoping that the reader gets the right point. Accept this as a rule: the pictures don't speak for themselves. If there is some point you wish to make with them, you have to tell the reader what it is.

pronounced as our short A. As a result, there is no need to clarify how it should be pronounced at the end of a woman's name. In English however there is ambiguity. Who really is dear Sarah? Is she "Săr—ā" or "Săr— ă:" "Saray" or "Sarah?" The final "h" makes the second syllable into "ah," so the "a" is short.

Example: potato and more potatoes

Why is a potato spelled that way, but when we decide to eat two of them each one apparently becomes a "potatoe?" "Potato is of course the three syllable word: "pō—tā—tō." Now, when we have two of them, we could just add a plural "s," "potatos." Potatos is still a three syllable words because it still has only three vowels but the last syllable is different. It is now "pō—tā—tŏs." The second "o" has become short because it is followed by a consonant. Hmmm. Not good. We wanted to be talking about our toes, not our toss. Aha! Try the four syllable version, "pō—tā—tō—ĕs." It is necessary to keep that "s" away from the "o," so the short e – actually, a mute E – comes in very handy. We could have used the mute E at the end instead, but that would obscure the role of the s, which is to pluralize our single lonely potato. It would be written "potatose" and pronounced "pō—tā—tō—sƏ," but it would be an improper plural because it would not end in the letter s.

Example: great and greet

English pronunciation still has its lurking ambiguities, of which the vowel combinations "ea" and "ee" constitute important examples. The soft vowels, "e" and "i" have two different long pronunciations, along the lines explained above. In Old English and Scandinavian languages, long e is pronounced "ee," but on the Continent it is "ay," as in "say" or "day." Long I in old English is "aye" but on the Continent it is "ee." So now let's consider "great." It is a two syllable word, "grē—at." Note that the "e" and "a" belong to distinct syllables; they are not a diphthong. Okay, that's understood, but how are we supposed to pronounce long E? Is it "gree" or "gray?" The choice is actually arbitrary. Not arbitrary for you and I – for us the correct pronunciation is fixed by the conventions of the language – but not fixed logically by any other rule. The chosen pronunciation probably derives from the history of the word, suggesting that the word did not derive from the Scandinavian roots of Old English, because we use the Continental pronunciation.

In any case, the surplus valid pronunciation is just the thing we need to differentiate "greet" from "great." We can also use the fact the "ăt" and "ĕt" sound almost identical to differentiate between the phonetic spellings: "grē—ăt," and "grē—ĕt." It is tempting to conclude from this example that when the vowel combination is "ea," we use the Continental pronunciation of the long e, but there are counterexamples to that rule. For instance the E in "lē–ăn." It is true on the other side, however, that the combination "ee" always sounds like "ee."

Example: slippery "y," "ay" and aye"

It is no fun having letters that can be either consonants or vowels. The letter Y is however much better behaved than we have any reason to expect. In Old English the character Y was used to signify short I in words where the I should have been long. Thus, the man who forges iron into horseshoes is in Old English a "Smythe," and not a "Smithe." The difference is that either of the words is a two syllable world, with mute E at the end. The first syllable could be either "smy" or "smi," but if it is the latter, the I would be long I. By conventional usage in old English, Y is always short I. We don't recognize that particular rule anymore, so we just bring our horses to the smith.[3] On the way, the letter Y became like long I, as it is pronounced in the Continental languages.[4]

Consider the word "day." We have to ask ourselves how many syllables it has. If the Y is a consonant it has one syllable, but if the Y is a vowel it has two syllables. The way the Y is pronounced gives no guidance. Both vowel and consonant are pronounced the same way. The answer comes from how we pronounce the rest of the word. If Y is a consonant, the word is "dăy," and the "a" would be short A. This spelling would more familiarly be pronounced like the coloring agent: "dye."[5] That in fact is how this word is pronounced in Scotland and in Australia. If however the Y is a vowel, the word has two syllables, and is pronounced "dā—y."

Now for "aye." In this case the Y is a consonant, I can't imagine any word consisting only of three vowels, so it is a two syllable word, "ăy—Ə." The "a" is short because it is followed by a consonant. The final, mute E is there to signal that the "y" is the consonant.

Double Consonants

These rules also explain the function of double consonants. We double a consonant not to change the pronunciation of the consonant, of course – the pronunciation of consonants is almost invariable – but to signal the pronunciation of the vowel that precedes it.

Example: Rabbit

Why is a rabbit having a double "b?" Spelled with a single b, we don't know where to break for the syllables. Is the word "răb—īt," or is it "rā—bĭt?" There is one simple way to resolve the confusion, by writing "răb—bīt."

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[3] We obviously don't feel any need for the second syllable either, which is alright. The final "th" keeps the I short.

[4] Note however that smith is still a two syllable word although we don't bother with the mute e at the end. This is an example of a phenomenon I will talk about later: letting the written language be corrupted by bad pronunciation.

[5] "Dye" is phonetically "dī—Ə." How the "y" came to be pronounced like long "i" is a mystery. If the word followed the unusual pronunciation/spelling rules, it would be spelled "daye."

Example: Cabin

Aha! you say. What about "cabin?" Obviously this entails a different spelling rule, or an additional one. In the Gaelic root language that is one of the components of English – by way of the Britons – nouns generally end in the letter "n," and the final syllable is some variant of "in," "an," "on," or "oon." These are the English counterparts of the Italian "ino" and "ina." Everyone familiar with this practice would naturally and correctly assume that the final "in" on cabin was also the final syllable. In that case there is no confusion and no need for a second "b." Actually, as in Italian, the suffix "in" is a diminutive. "Cabin" means a "little cab," as in "cabinet."

The syllable break is so important that in older languages it was sometimes forced by inserting a character that was not to be pronounced, but only signified the break. In Old English the character used was the letter "p." It survives in a few words. The name Thompson, for instance, signifies the son of Thomas, but the obvious spelling, "Thomson," is confusing because of the rule in "cabin." Thomson would naturally be pronounced "Thoms—on." While that is a nice name, is loses the meaning of "son of…" The extra, silent p forces us to say "Thom—son." The same is true of the "p" in Simpson ("son of Simon") and in pumpkin. Without the "p" in your pumpkin, the word would be "pumk—in," which is not so bad, but in the old days the pair "um" was pronounced "un." So lacking the "p," pumpkin would be pronounced "punk—in." We might have heard it pronounced that way. With the p however, the word is pun-kin, which is a much more common pronunciation. Instead of the diminutive "-in," the modifying syllable is "-kin."[6]

It seems to work well enough to leave some archaic spelling alone. Everyone seems to know what a cabin is. Some consideration should be given however to regularizing this part of our language, by doubling the consonant whenever there would logically be some confusion about where to break for syllables. If cabbin takes a little getting used to, it is only a small sacrifice for the greater good of making our language comprehensible.

Deleting mute E

There is a trend in linguistic quarters to cash in all the mute E's, on the grounds that they weren't going to be intoned anyway. We discarded a lot of them long ago without seeming hardship. Words that now end in a sequence of two consonants originally had another syllable. For instance, "hard" was once a two syllable word, "har-də." Even today, if we want to pronounce the "r" clearly we have to say the word as a two syllable word. The "də" final syllable is easily detectable in our voice. The alternative is to shortchange the "r." Because there is some ambiguity about "r," even in English, that is not too hard to do. The letter "r" can be a vowel, as I pointed out above,

[6] The root word "kin" means "related to," and as a modifier it signifies "a kind of." So a pun-kin is a kind of "pun." Heaven only knows what a pun was in those days.

even though it is not one in English. Its sound can be easily muted, avoiding in the case of "hard" any clash of consecutive consonants.

The simplification that transformed "harde" into "hard" can be carried too far however, and is carried too far in some modern American spellings. In the two syllable word "brid-ge," the mute E performs its usual task of giving the "g" someplace to go. The same is true of the mute E in "jud-ge." There is no call to simply drop the mute E as far as I know, probably because the sequence "dg" is not nearly as pronounceable as "rd." But when Americans add "ment" to the word, suddenly they can do without the mute E, and the word becomes "judgment." This is one simplification too far because it fundamentally confuses the function of syllables. The word "judgement," as it is spelled in Britain, has three vowels and therefore three syllables: "jud-ge-ment." The word "judgment" has two vowels and therefore only two syllables: "jud-gment?" "judg-ment?" It is unpronounceable.

Dropping the mute E breaks the bond between spelling and pronunciation; we no longer expect to pronounce words as they are spelled. The American response is some variant of "So what. You knew exactly what I meant." That is true at the moment. We all suspected that "judgment" was really "judgement." But if in the interests of saving ink and paper we are entitled to simply drop letters at random, how about "jdt." If I was forced to interpret that as a word, I would very likely have guessed that it is "judgement." So I would have known exactly what the writer meant. But at this point the written language would diverge from the language: the spoken language. It would be a code writing, like tweeting or texting or whatever.

Conclusion

No one ever said that pronunciation is easy, but it doesn't have to be nearly as hard as our uneducated educators want to make it. For the most part, it makes sense. The key is syllables, recognizing in addition that very few vowel combinations in English are diphthongs.

There is no way around the fact that the more our writing and our written language implement our spoken language, the more effective our writing will be. We mortals are ingenious creatures, a fact that my ability, however minimal, to translate scientific articles in Russian makes abundantly clear. That does not however change the fact that it is not effective communication. To corrupt the written language moreover is not only counterproductive; it is completely unnecessary once we study and master the very simple, logical morphological rules of English writing and teach them to the next generation.

It is terribly important that the rules be few and logical. In theory, we could have a separate spelling rule for each word. We could simply agree that "house" is spelled "y-t-5-7-x-z." As long as yt57xz always refers to the kind of place where you and I live, that language would in principle be comprehensible. The problem is that it would require

feats of raw memory far beyond the powers of even the cleverest of us. We need help. We need to be able to interpret each individual case, each individual word, from a small set of easily remembered rules. The way to accomplish that is to make the rules pretty systematic and logical. In this note I spent some pages reviewing the underpinnings of syllabification and of vowel sounds because the story, once understood, makes sense of a vast number of individual cases. It informs our pronunciation of nearly every word in the language and does so in terms of essentially two rules: the list of available vowels and the rule for using the long or short vowel form in any syllable.

It is highly predictable and it is also quite understandable that most readers, even if they have gotten this far, will be growing uncomfortable with my rules. The natural reaction – my reaction when confronted with unfamiliar rules – is to say "Well, those may be your rules, but I never heard of them before. Why should I accept them? On your say-so?" Good question. I would argue that they work. They bring some logic and order to pronunciation. But actually the case is much simpler and more compelling. I didn't make up these rules. I simply extracted them from how you and I actually speak. They aren't my rules; they are your rules. They describe and codify the way Americans connect the written and the spoken language. Everyone knows what his nā-mə is, and would never confuse it with his năm (whatever a năm might be). These are already your rules just as much as it is your name.

Implied critique of modern education

There is a reason why these rules seem new and suspicious. They are not taught in our schools. There is moreover and good reason why they are not taught: they are not known. Why not? Linguistics is by no means a specialty of mine. I have studied many things in school and claim some measure of recognizable expertise in them, but I cannot stake any claim to expertise in the English language, except as a frequent user of it. How is it that a rank amateur can see what our professional teachers apparently can't see?

I started with the example of how vitally important good handwriting – decent, legible handwriting – is. How it opens the experience of writing to the most creative and unstructured applications. How without it we can express ideas that can be expressed in conventional terms, but we can't express parts of ideas when we don't even know what it is that we are trying to say. That is creative writing. If we discard handwriting, we discard creativity.

I followed with the example – also pertinent to the matter of teaching though not tied directly to language – of memory and memory training. The latest research into I.Q. and what is called "general intelligence" shows how intimately it is related to and dependent on memory. There is no kind of problem solving for people with poor memory.

Lastly, I laid out a structure of spelling, or equivalently a structure of pronunciation, that strengthens the language skills of the students individually and that,

because it is simply and universal, promotes the common language. How many times have we heard some young person petulantly sneer "Well, that's how I spell my name." of how they spell some other word. No one has the right to dictate to everyone else how to spell anything. Misguided persons can simply drop out if they please. There is no law that says they have to communicate with me. But the spelling rules of the language are a treasure that we hold in common and in trust for future generations. It is not *our* spelling, it is *their* spelling that matters, if we are intent on communicating with them. This fact should not be overstated. There is room for ingenuity in expression, for finding new, more effective ways to express oneself. Even new words created by deliberately misspelling old words have a place. But not when they are the result of casual indifference.

BTW

It should be clear by this point that I am by no means a rock-ribbed defender of the spelling practices we learned in grammar school. I have no problem, in particular, with spelling the second person, plural, nominative pronoun "y-o-u" with a single letter "u," especially since strictly speaking "you" is a misspelling of yoo. We are not robots, we are human beings and we have pretty good memories. In the texting world, you is u, and many adults feel offended by that. To some degree that is understandable, though linguistically it is not. For the youth to have their own, radically different spelling of "you" seems to be part of a broader trend to reject the idea of a common language. It seems to us a rejection of the idea that no individual can dictate his or her own, proprietary spelling that the rest of us then have to submit to. Language is something we hold in common, and it is the judgements of the society rather than the desires of the individuals that make the rules. So if we collectively accept that you are "you," it is foolishness to try to rebel. Logically speaking, however, there is actually no reason for all those other letters. "u" is a perfectly good spelling of "you."

That defense does not even begin to work for nonsense like BTW. Since the letters are joined together, we have to understand BTW as a word. Which word is it? My guess is "batoowah." I'm not too sure what that word means. It seems to be from the Vietnamese. Again, if you sit me down and, when my breathing has returned to normal, explain that BTW mean "by the way," I can accept that. I can even remember it. I can't exactly remember why you are too lazy to write "by the way," but some things we just have to accept. The implication however is something that I can't accept. It is that our written language consists of complex characters – sequences like BTW – that do not correlate in any natural way with the spoken English language. Put it this way, if BTW is "by the way," then we could write, "What do I know?" as XXTP. As long as XXTP always signifies "What do I know?" we're fine.

Well, maybe "fine" is a bit hasty. If XXTP means "What do I know?" then how do we write "What do you know?" In a burst of creative energy, I have decided that it

should be written MO35TOL. Why not? Makes perfect sense. If words aren't words, then let's create! You might object that "What do I know" and "What do you know?" are somehow related thoughts. Very true. So what? Thoughts are things that are defined in the English language, or in any language. They are why we have language. When I say "What do I know?" you understand immediately that I am expressing my submission to a higher authority; perhaps you. You're right; that is exactly what it means. That is exactly what XXTP means, neither more nor less. If in the very next sentence I queried "What do you know? You would understand immediately that I am questioning your credentials as that higher authority. Right again; that's exactly what MO35TOL means.

The point is very clear. When we make our written, symbol language match up with our language – whichever language we call "ours" – by means of a small set of agreed conventions – when we agree that our writing should be phonetic – we have opened up the written language to interpretation and to expression based on the common, spoken language that we know already. The alternative, carried to its extreme, is to have a unique "rule" for every single word, like XXTP and MO35XOL. The problem is not that these "words" are illogical. They are perfectly logical if we say they are. The problem is that they are not communicative. What is illogical is to use written language to frustrate communication rather than to facilitate it. We don't need to learn a new language. There will always be imperfections, like the misspelling of "you," but so what. Life is full of imperfections. As long as they are few enough not to call into question the broad conventions which govern the spoken language and the translation from spoken to written language, they are essentially harmless.

Language is something that we hold in common. If it is not in common, it is not of any use. I have been guaranteed in Article 1 of the Bill of Rights that right of free speech, which includes the right to invent a language of my own and to write exclusively in that language. That right is about as valuable to me as the right to go off and live by myself in a tent at the South Pole. Just between you and me, I'm not going.

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